

REMAKING OF MINDS AND MORALS.

BY VICTOR S. YARROS.

DEEP and interesting questions are raised by Prof. James Harvey Robinson in his new book, entitled *The Mind in the Making*.

It is highly probable that the author himself did not realize fully the nature and variety of the questions he indirectly and unconsciously recalled to thoughtful persons by the thesis and its treatment in the bold and suggestive volume. Doubtless he considered the issues he did discuss quite sufficient unto the day, or the element addressed by him; but the matters ignored, though clearly involved in the problem, will repay some attention and study. Indeed, they challenge such attention, and he who deals with them soberly and scientifically, not arbitrarily, may be driven to dissent from some of Prof. Robinson's propositions.

The quintessential thesis of the book is that the modern mind is not free or fit enough to cope with the intricate and perplexing problems, social, economic and ethical, that face it and imperatively demand solution. And the mind is not free or fit because it has not succeeded in emancipating itself from "lumber"—metaphysical, theological, historical, what not. It is, in other words, still enslaved and enchained by the dead Past, and does not clearly think of the present in the appropriate and real terms of the present. It still cherishes superstitious veneration for Old Masters, old notions, and lacks the courage to scrap them and build independently on the basis of facts and established principles of science. The modern mind persists in seeking light in the dust-covered volumes of Aristotle, Plato, St. Paul, St. Thomas Aquinas, or in vague biblical texts that each school interprets to suit itself.

Why not do what Dr. Johnson advised—clear our minds of cant and irrelevance, let the dead bury the dead, and use our own knowledge, our own experience and our own faculties? Why not go to

Nature and to Society as we ourselves see and feel them for necessary generalizations?

Such questions are decidedly pertinent—or, rather, they would be pertinent were the underlying assumption well-founded—namely, the assumption that the modern mind *is* unduly fettered by the past, or that it is afraid to face the facts of life, or that our conduct *is* governed by obsolete and irrelevant ideas against which our own independent judgment revolts when it gets a chance.

But the assumption in question is baseless. Humanity is *not* fettered by notions which it could shed at will as garments are shed. To the degree to which humanity *is* controlled by the past, that past has entered into the warp and woof of the present. Ideas men live by are not mere empty professions that could be renounced and made to give way to significant and vital ideas. It is true that there is such a thing as “lip service,” but the very fact that there is such a thing militates against the assumption that we permit antiquated and refuted precepts to shape our lives and govern our conduct. The phrase, Lip Service, implies a conflict between the code professed and code followed. In condemning lip service, or hypocrisy, we tacitly affirm that our actual conduct is controlled by newer principles than those inherited from the past.

It is not the staggering burden of past superstitions and past fallacies that prevents us moderns from standing up and grappling manfully with the problems of our own day. It is something wholly different. What is that something?

Prof. Robinson himself answers this question correctly, though he fails to draw the right inference from that answer. “We are,” he says, “always and at once animals, savages and children.” Exactly; that is what we are, and cannot help being. Our calamities and maladjustments, our fratricidal wars, our class and caste divisions, our cruelties and wrongs are all ultimately ascribable to our natures and minds. And we are born with certain traits and characters that are scarcely more subject to voluntary manipulation than are the properties of true natural elements. Human conduct is determined by human nature. If we are always and at once animals, savages and children, pray why complain of our conduct, and why quarrel with the inevitable?

If there is hope of healthier and nobler human relations, of a better society, of peace and concord, in the future, that hope rests on the fact that man, after all, is something more, at times, than animal, savage and child. He has glimpses, visions, impulses, as-

pirations, ideals that we call sublime or divine. We speak of our conscience, of the still small voice, of the categorical imperative, of our better nature. Surely, even the narrowest materialist or the most inveterate pessimist will not quarrel with Shakespeare's tribute to man—

"What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"

The root of the difficulty is in the fact that man has too much of the ape and tiger in him and too little of the qualities that make for unity and the peace of righteousness. Not past "ideas", but present passions, emotions, interests, prejudices, are responsible for the ills of the body social.

If the modern mind is not free or fit, it is because it is enslaved by irrational passions and habits, by ingrained and inherited antipathies, and by greed, envy, jealousy and fear.

This conclusion should be self-evident, but since many question it, let us consider the proof of it supplied by the familiar yet ever-striking contrast between the operations of the modern mind in the sphere covered by the exact or pure sciences and the sphere sought to be governed by the social and moral sciences. There is no complaint from any quarter that the mathematician, the astronomer, the physicist, the chemist, the geologist, or the biologist is hampered by past or present superstitions. The minds of the men and women who devote themselves to the exact sciences are fit and free. The scientists in their proper domain are not conscious of any pull from the animal, the savage or the child within them. Darwin, Huxley, De Vries, Mendell, Tyndall, Helmholtz, Pasteur, Mach, Einstein, to name only a few pioneers and leaders in science, did their work, and thousands of more modest workers in laboratories and libraries are doing their work, without any sense of subjection to or interference by the past.

It is only in the fields of economics, politics and ethics that we hear so much about the "dead hand", the unfortunate influence of motives alien to our own true interests, the survival of puerile beliefs in an age of reason and science. Why this difference? The explanation is not far to seek. In dealing with economic and political questions the average person is almost invariably governed by his interests, his lower ambitions, his passions. He pays little or no attention to the principles of science, and he suspects that the self-

styled savants themselves are not free from bias and prejudice. Economics and politics affect the pocket, the love of power, the social standing of men and women. No one favors the Relativity theory because it will help him to make money, and no one opposes it because it will cause him to lose money. Is there life on Mars? The question will be answered eventually by evidence, evidence gathered and weighed without bias. How old is the earth? Is variation a factor in the evolution of species, or not? Are acquired characters inherited or not? The average person expects the men of science to solve these problems, and he expects to accept the solutions. Not so with protection vs. free trade, the gold standard vs. some other standard, or no standard at all, or public ownership of utilities, or compulsory arbitration, or the referendum and recall. All such questions as these arouse class, group and party passions. It is idle to appeal to scientific opinion; that opinion is rejected with contempt or indifference. Professors are sneered at as "theorists", and the "practical man" creates his own economics and politics as he runs.

Now, where, pray, in all this is there any subjection to the past? The subjection is of the less powerful to the more powerful motives, of altruism to egoism, of justice to self-interest, of ideas to fears and suspicions.

Prof. Robinson is aware of these facts and considerations. But he pleads for the banishment of all motives that conflict with the one proper and sane human motive, the steady promotion of the rational happiness of humanity. By all means, by all means. Let us strive to undermine and destroy those unworthy motives, but in doing so what shall we encounter? Mere notions bequeathed by the past? No, very lively and robust emotional factors functioning in the present. To narrow self-interest enlightened self-interest must be opposed. To provincial ignorance, breadth of view. To race and national antipathies, inter-racial and international ties and bonds of every kind and description. To fear of pecuniary loss, forms of mutual insurance and social assumption of risks incident to necessary but painful readjustments. To excessive and wasteful competition, intelligent co-operation.

Some time ago Mr. Elihu Root, a keen and experienced diplomat and statesman, asserted in a public address that "the world was full of hatred and strife and murder today because of the incapacity of millions of people in organized states to receive the truth that is being spread through all civilization and which is to be theirs in the

centuries to come—but which they are not yet ready to receive.” What can the lovers of peace, justice and human progress do meantime? Mr. Root answers: They must build character; they must exercise, and stimulate in others, the virtues that make human character—compassion, kindly consideration, willingness to make sacrifices or positive contributions to the stock of general good and the joy of life.

Who will, after due reflection on human conduct, past and present, seriously challenge Mr. Root’s diagnosis or remedy?

It is not enough to attack and correct false ideas, superstitious survivals, outworn creeds. It is even more important to attend to the emotions of men, as well as to their institutions and arrangements. International and inter-racial walls or barriers make for misunderstanding and distrust and antipathy. Intercourse, contacts, service in a common cause, the creation and development of institutions conducive to peace and mutual comprehension—these are the factors that will gradually free us of hate and strife.

If the foregoing be sound and true—as, in fact, it self-evidently is—let us inquire whether the great teachers and seers of the Past propagated doctrines or principles inconsonant therewith. If we have to repudiate and unlearn ancient precepts, let us make sure we are repudiating and unlearning the right—or the wrong—things. If we must cleanse and free our modern minds, let us take care we remove that which ought to be removed, not that which ought to be conserved and cherished.

Shall we, for instance, repudiate the Ten Commandments? Hardly. Shall we repudiate the Greek ideal of a sound mind in a sound body? Hardly. Shall we repudiate the essential teachings of Jesus of Nazareth—the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven within ourselves, the gospel of human brotherhood and mercy? Hardly, again. Shall we repudiate the essential teaching of Gautama, that men, to achieve serenity and happiness, must lose themselves in something far greater than their egoistic interests? Must we repudiate the essential teaching of Confucius? Once more, hardly.

These teachings, indeed, have been commended to us by the most modern of the moderns—from Tolstoy, the Anarchist-Communist, and Ruskin, the “reddest of the reds”, as he whimsically called himself, down to Chesterton, Shaw, Wells, James and Bertrand Russell, and other Pragmatist and Neo-Realist philosophers.

It strikes one, on further analysis of the situation, that what we have to repudiate and unlearn is something that passes for *modern*

thought rather than for ancient. The gospel of the ruthless oppression of the masses, the "rabble", by the "supermen"; the gospel of brute force, of utter indifference to the fate of the weak; the gospel of a remorseless struggle for existence and domination, of the rejection of pity and sympathy as "slave ethics"—these are the teachings that, whether professed or tacitly acted upon by men innocent of philosophy, hamper and retard human progress, and continue to fill the world of hate and strife!

The truth is, the moral development of civilized humanity has not kept pace with its purely intellectual development. The intellect proposes, but the passions and emotions dispose. To perceive the right is one thing; to follow and practice it is another thing. Just as the average criminal knows and admits that murder, burglary, arson and forgery are wrongful and anti-social acts, which society properly forbids, and the only plea he is able to make is that his will was too weak to resist temptation, or to keep him on the path of virtue, so the vast majority of human beings perceive and concede that their conduct as neighbors, or citizens, or employers, or workers, or merchants, or professional men, leaves much to be desired from the viewpoint of their own professed ideal, but at the same time they plead that as society is organized they cannot be as just, as high-minded, as generous as they would like to be. They have a sense of weakness, of inferiority, of sin, of imperfection—and they have this sense because they "know better", because they have an ideal. The ideal belongs to the past, but it is the nobler part of the present.

Many have blamed modern Science in recent years for its non-moral, indifferentist attitude toward human happiness, its willingness to lend its marvelous resources to the forces of destruction. "Chemical warfare" is an instance in point. Submarines and flying torpedoes are another instance. Science, the indictment reads, shows the race how to commit suicide, how to ruin and wreck the structure of civilization so slowly and laboriously erected in the course of the ages. Why should not Science indignantly refuse to play so ignoble and vicious a role? Why should it not deliberately limit itself to construction and improvement?

The answer is clear and obvious. Science is an abstraction. It is the men and women of science who invent weapons and instruments of destruction, and they do so, first, because they are not mere or pure scientists, but nationalists, patriots, citizens or subjects as well, and they are told that patriotism demands of them loyal performance of such functions as "the State" may assign to them, and,

in the second place, because it is a fact that any weapon is utilizable in defensive as well as in offensive operations. The weapon itself is not criminal; the men who order its use may be criminal—or imbecile. Chemical warfare is horrible, but it may be resorted to, of course, to punish and repel brutal aggressors, enemies of human peace and happiness. The men of science cannot know how their inventions will be used. They may even be misled and duped by cunning politicians and diplomats in a given case and made to believe that they are rendering laudable patriotic and humanitarian service when, by ingenious inventions, they are helping to win a particular war. In our time of specialization, it is becoming increasingly difficult for a man of science to form opinions and judgments concerning complex questions in other fields than those they respectively cultivate. An excellent chemist may be a very poor economist or sociologist, and a good economist may be a most indifferent psychologist. To ask science to save the human race is, in effect, to ask hundreds of distinct groups of specialists to drop their several departments and work out solutions of the problems that lie outside of the spheres of most sciences—moral, industrial, political and social problems. The request would be absurd. Society itself must ardently wish to escape destruction, and to apply scientific discoveries constructively instead of destructively. That way lies salvation. In each community there will have to be, at least, a sufficiently strong and influential minority of lovers of righteousness to be able virtually to leaven the whole mass and to guide it toward the goal of the noblest and greatest of men since the advent of civilization. And neither the minority, the exceptionally gifted individuals, nor the mass should break with the Past—or *could* possibly break with the Past. We must conserve our social inheritance, for much of it is sound and wholesome, and seek to improve it only where it is manifestly obsolescent; improve it in the light that is ours, with the minds fashioned by the evolutionary process.